

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 RANGOON 001577

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/BCLTV; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/12/2014

TAGS: [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KISL](#) [BM](#) [NGO](#)

SUBJECT: UNHCR'S THIN BLUE LINE BETWEEN THE SPDC AND STATELESS MUSLIMS

REF: A. RANGOON 355

[B](#). 03 RANGOON 258

[C](#). RANGOON 1524 AND PREVIOUS

[D](#). RANGOON 1136

[E](#). DHAKA 4118 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: COM Carmen Martinez for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The UN's refugee agency has essentially exhausted its mandate to oversee repatriation operations along the Bangladesh border in northern Rakhine State and settled into an uneasy but crucial role providing a wide umbrella of protection, and coordinating basic relief services, for the region's 800,000 stateless and repressed Rohingya Muslims. UNHCR, and several of its dozen implementing partners, conclude that the Burmese regime's repressive treatment of the Muslim population makes the region ripe for Islamic militancy. It is clear that the presence of UNHCR and INGOs helps to limit the appeal of extremism and to protect the local population from even broader regime abuses. However, any of the SPDC's harsh tools of repression that could fuel extremism are also the same means by which the regime will likely thwart such activity. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Our December 8-10 trip to northern Rakhine State (NRS), organized by UNHCR for over a dozen Rangoon and Bangkok diplomats, was our most recent opportunity to visit this politically sensitive and remote area. The GOB prohibits tourists, foreign and domestic, from visiting the heavily military controlled region and reluctantly grants permission to diplomats traveling under the auspices of the UNHCR. According to UNHCR resident representative Rajiv Kapur, recent political changes in Burma almost led to the cancellation of the December trip until SPDC Senior General Than Shwe personally issued a "last-minute" authorization.

You Have the Right to....Just About Nothing  
-----

[1](#)3. (SBU) As during previous UNHCR trips (refs A and B), we witnessed first-hand a stunning and systematic array of regime tactics aimed at repressing Rakhine State's nearly 800,000 Rohingya Muslims, one-third of whom are refugee returnees from Bangladesh. Restrictions and abuses include, but are not limited to: denial of Burmese citizenship (despite birth in Burma or generations of residency); high-level permission required for marriage, movement between villages, and employment; widespread forced labor and compulsory contributions; a complete lack of due process; a prohibition on ownership of land and on state employment; limited access to post-secondary education; a moratorium on construction or refurbishing of mosques; restrictions on public celebrations of holidays; and a requirement that many consumables and services be purchased solely through state-designated agents.

[1](#)4. (SBU) An additional regime tactic has been the ongoing construction of "model villages" for ethnic Burmans (Buddhists) relocated from other parts of Burma in exchange for housing and arable land. At least 22 model villages are in operation, built with local forced labor. The self-contained enclaves, which include schools and health clinics and are strictly off-limits to Muslims, are reportedly a pet project of Than Shwe's and are designed to "mitigate" the three percent population growth among Rohingya. The model villages, highly resented by locals, are a dismal failure as many of the urbanite Burman "pioneers" quickly abandon their isolated homesteads. The GOB has countered this attrition by populating the latest model villages with ex-convicts and former insurgents, surrounding the compounds with barbed wire and armed guards.

"The UN High Commissioner for Refugees....and Human Rights"  
-----

[1](#)5. (U) UNHCR's primary objectives in NRS are to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of remaining camp residents in Bangladesh (about 19,800 Rohingya, the majority of whom have indicated no desire to return to Burma) and to ensure the sustainable reintegration of vulnerable groups among those who have returned (a total of over 236,000 since 1992) and among those who did not flee during the 1991-92 exodus

(roughly 550,000). As it has for several years (ref A and B), the UNHCR supports or collaborates with twelve international NGOs and three GOB-affiliated entities in providing a wide range of successful reintegration activities including health care, community services, language training, income generation, agricultural support, and various feeding programs.

16. (C) UNHCR's role in facilitating voluntary repatriation, however, has diminished significantly. In 2004, less than 200 refugees have repatriated through official channels, leaving UNHCR to focus almost exclusively on protection and reintegration issues. Senior UNHCR staff admit that the organization has taken on what is largely a human rights function, protecting the repressed Muslim population as well as the international NGOs that operate in the region. NGO officials and local community leaders alike expressed concern that should UNHCR terminate its presence in the region, no other entity could duplicate its protection and coordination role, leaving the Rohingya and the NGOs even more vulnerable to the excesses of the military regime.

Adding Fuel to the Fire?

17. (C) UNHCR and NGO staff reported that prior to a Rangoon-directed purge of former Prime Minister Khin Nyunt's military intelligence apparatus (ref C), the MI component of the local Border Immigration Headquarters (known as "NaSaKa") played a leading role in the bullying and repression of the Rohingya population. In the post-purge era, MI has all but "disappeared." However, initial breathing room appears to be short-lived, as regular Army units and Special Branch police have replaced MI with, according to UNHCR and NGOs, "even more restrictive measures."

18. (C) The combination of decades of centrally directed repression, a virtual Burmese military "cordon" that surrounds the northern Rakhine region, and a porous border with neighboring Bangladesh creates what UNHCR and several NGOs described as a situation "ripe for Islamic militancy." One UNHCR senior official said, "it is clear that a sea of idle, unemployed men--denied citizenship and the right to marriage, and living in close proximity to well-funded organizations in Bangladesh--have nowhere to vent their frustrations and are easy pickings for Muslim extremists hungry for safe-havens and new adherents."

Comment: Ripe for Extremists But Rotten for Extremism

19. (C) Rohingya Muslims, among Burma's most repressed populations, face a hopeless and uncertain future and, with repatriation slowed to a mere trickle, UNHCR's original mandate has been largely fulfilled. However, UNHCR continues to play a crucial protection role and has demonstrated a capability to take the regime to task over sensitive issues in this region (ref D). Resident cards issued to all returnees, a reduction in forced labor incidents, and a softening of restrictions on INGOs are but a few of UNHCR's recent achievements. We are hard-pressed to identify a successor organization if/when UNHCR departs. The ICRC, for example, would be unable to provide protection for other INGOs; the UNDP would have no capacity to tangle with authorities over human rights abuses; and no organization would be as likely as UNHCR to provide the international community with regular assessments on regime abuses and growing discontent among the repressed Muslim population.

10. (C) On the issue of extremism in northern Rakhine State, we agree with UNHCR that hopeless conditions make the region "ripe for militancy" and the presence of UNHCR and INGOs helps limit the appeal of extremism. However, the SPDC's harsh tools of repression are the very means by which the regime thwarts either extremism or political opposition. The Burmese Army has succeeded in rendering ineffective such insurgent movements as the Arakan Rohingya Islamic Front and the Rohingya Solidarity Organization, groups that are now dormant if not extinct. The SPDC has also banned Muslim political parties, including the pro-democracy National Democratic Party for Human Rights and its four Rohingya elected to Parliament in 1990. Furthermore, strict restrictions on movement and assembly; an imposing military presence; and prison terms for the most minor of infractions are imposing obstacles to any would-be extremists. End

Comment.  
MARTINEZ